

The New Face of Authoritarianism: From Russ Vought to Global Power Struggles

Authoritarianism is never just a return to the past. It is always a reinvention, even when clothed in nostalgia. In the 21st century, authoritarian politics has taken on new forms, blending old instincts with modern tools—religion with bureaucracy, nationalism with

data surveillance, nostalgia with nuclear weapons. From Russ Vought's blueprint for America to China's technocratic experiments and Russia's retrograde myth-making, the question is not whether authoritarianism is "back." The question is how it is mutating in response to the unfathomable complexity of modern society.

I. Vought and the American Temptation of Simplification

Russ Vought, the former Trump budget director and now intellectual architect of Project 2025, captures a deep anxiety within the United States: that its political and governmental system has grown too vast, too contradictory, too complex to manage. The American state is indeed a hydra—layers of

agencies, tax expenditures, contradictory rules, and overlapping jurisdictions. For ordinary citizens, and even for policymakers, the federal system often appears as an illegible maze.

Vought's response is to propose "radical constitutionalism," which sounds restorative but functions as revolutionary. He suggests that the solution to complexity is simplification:

subordinating the federal bureaucracy to the presidency, collapsing diffuse institutions into a single chain of command, and infusing the state with Christian-nationalist identity. In fiscal terms, this means drastic cuts, consolidations, and politicizations. In constitutional terms, it means weakening checks and balances.

He is not wrong to diagnose

the problem. Complexity corrodes trust and breeds inefficiency. But his remedy is clarity at the cost of resilience. The United States, like ancient Athens, thrives on a cacophony of voices, however inefficient. To strip away the mess in search of Spartan simplicity is to court rigidity and eventual collapse.

Vought's project illustrates a central paradox of modern authoritarianism: it arises not

in spite of complexity, but because of it. Where citizens feel locked out of the maze, strongmen offer the seductive dream of a single lever, a single voice, a single command. The danger is that simplicity, once imposed, erases the very adaptability that makes survival possible.

II. Athens, Sparta, and the

Cyclical Problem of Order and Freedom

This tension is as old as political thought itself.

Athens, open and argumentative, embodied pluralism and liberty. Its democracy produced brilliance in philosophy, art, and politics. But its very openness created volatility; demagogues led it into overreach, and the city collapsed under the weight of

its ambitions.

Sparta, rigid and disciplined, chose order over freedom. It created a society capable of extraordinary military cohesion. But it relied on systemic exploitation of the helots and froze itself into a war-machine incapable of adaptation. In the end, it too collapsed.

The lesson is that each model, pursued in purity,

generates its own undoing. Freedom dissolves into chaos; order petrifies into fragility. The history of political life is a pendulum between Athens and Sparta, each side offering compelling advantages and fatal risks.

Modern authoritarian projects replay this ancient drama in new guises. Vought offers Spartan clarity to America's Athenian mess. Yet even as he seeks order, the

seeds of fragility are visible:
purges of bureaucracy reduce
competence; centralization
invites abuse; ideology
replaces pragmatic
governance.

III. China: Radical Technotication

Where America wrestles with
its ancient oscillation, China

has embarked on something different: an experiment in “radical technotication.” The Chinese Communist Party seeks not to choose Athens or Sparta, but to transcend both through data, algorithms, and surveillance. By marrying Leninist centralism with market dynamism and digital control, Beijing aims to engineer stability in a world of flux.

The bet is audacious: that

technology can create enough efficiency and predictive power to keep authoritarianism adaptive. Social credit systems, AI monitoring, and big data are tools not of nostalgia but of invention. China is not looking backward to Confucian dynasties; it is building a new political machine that tries to make constant feedback loops replace the noisy pluralism of democracy.

This form of authoritarianism is innovative, not restorative. It treats complexity as something to be mastered, measured, and streamlined—not erased. In doing so, China is testing whether authoritarianism can finally escape the fate of Sparta: collapse through rigidity.

IV. Russia: Destruction Instead of Renovation

Russia under Vladimir Putin presents the opposite picture. Rather than reinvent itself, Russia has turned backward, building its politics on grievance and nostalgia. Orthodoxy, tsarist aesthetics, and Stalinist victory cults all serve to construct a myth of eternal Russia. Instead of harnessing the immense mobilized energy of its war

machine for creation, Russia has funneled it into destruction.

This is the tragedy of modern authoritarianism at its most regressive: the power to centralize and direct society exists, but the vision is shackled to hallucinations of the past. Russia could, in principle, channel authoritarian concentration into a “radical renovation”—a new infrastructure, new

scientific drive, a uniquely Russian modernity. But instead it burns its energy in attempts to restore a vanished empire. The result is mausoleums, not futures.

V. The Shared Dilemma

Vought's radical constitutionalism, China's technotification, and Russia's

nostalgia are three faces of the same dilemma: how to govern in an age when complexity seems unmanageable.

Vought offers clarity through religious nationalism and executive centralization.

China offers control through technological mastery.

Russia offers coherence through destruction and

myth.

All three are responses to the same anxiety: that traditional liberal democracy, like Athens, is too messy to endure. Yet the lesson of history is merciless: attempts to simplify, freeze, or dominate the system create new contradictions.

Athens collapsed in its exuberance; Sparta in its

rigidity. Rome survived longer by blending, but even Rome tipped into empire when balance failed. The United States, China, and Russia now re-enact these patterns with new tools and stakes.

VI. The Unfinished Struggle

The modern world reveals that authoritarianism is not a

static enemy but a shape-shifting response to the complexity of human community. Sometimes it comes dressed as religion, sometimes as data science, sometimes as nostalgia. But always it promises the same thing: simplicity in a world of unbearable intricacy.

The truth is harsher. Human governance has no final resting place. There is no single lever, no one voice that

can resolve the paradox of freedom and order.

Complexity is not an accident of modernity; it is its condition. To erase it is to erase the resilience that keeps societies alive.

And yet, authoritarianism will always seduce, because it speaks to our deepest longing: that someone, somewhere, can make the world simple again. The tragedy is that the attempt to

make it simple usually leaves
it shattered.

Addendum: The Human Task Beyond Authoritarianism

History is merciless in
teaching us the limits of
political design. Athens
burned bright and collapsed.
Sparta endured in steel and
broke in brittleness. Rome

stretched the pendulum
between freedom and order
until even its balances broke.
And now the United States,
China, and Russia replay
these dramas with new
technologies, new ideologies,
and nuclear stakes.

But what of us—the humans
caught in the gears? If
authoritarianism is a
recurring temptation, our
task is not to banish it
forever, but to create

conditions where its seduction does not consume everything. That task is neither purely ideological nor partisan. It is civilizational.

Three strands seem essential:

1. Radical literacy of complexity.

We must learn to live with complexity rather than fleeing from it. That means cultivating citizens capable of understanding systems, of

tolerating ambiguity, of resisting the lure of one-sentence solutions.

Complexity is not a defect of modern life; it is the ecology of survival.

2. Shared accountability in creation.

Authoritarianism thrives on destruction because creation is harder, slower, less dramatic. Our task is to invest our collective energies not in rage but in building—

institutions, technologies, arts, communities—that endure. That requires patience, humility, and a willingness to fail without retreating into nihilism.

3. Pluralism as resilience, not weakness.

The cacophony of voices in a democracy is not proof of decay but the soil of adaptability. The challenge is not to silence voices but to weave them into patterns of

cooperation. Pluralism is always inefficient, but efficiency is not the highest value; survival and renewal are.

In a sense, our work is the opposite of the authoritarian dream. Where they promise one lever, we must accept many. Where they promise clarity, we must embrace the blur. Where they seek to erase contradiction, we must live with it and grow from it.

This is no easy path. It is harder to build than to burn, harder to listen than to command, harder to endure ambiguity than to worship a single truth. But if humanity has any task at all, it is this: to remain open enough to keep inventing futures, yet stable enough to carry the past forward without turning it into chains.

Authoritarianism in its

modern forms shows us the dangers of forgetting this balance. Our work is to remember.